



Living the Purple Promise

After 23 years and 12 jobs with FedEx, Karen Rogers still can't wait to get up in the morning.

By YVONNE PARSONS POINDEXTER

Karen Rogers is a big fan of murder mysteries, but on the day a photographer arrives to take her picture for *Vanderbilt Business*, a biography of General George Marshall sits center stage on the table of her office at FedEx corporate headquarters just outside Memphis.

Photograph By DANIEL DUBOIS

“Someone suggested it to me,” she explains. “I’ve been told that I’m more like Marshall, a peacemaker type who understood the political landscape and knew how to navigate it, rather than a General Patton type. Both were driven to win the war, but they had different ways of getting there. One was willing to take a tank and say, ‘I don’t care how many bodies I run over—I’m going to win.’ But a statesman doesn’t care about every single skirmish—he looks for win/win solutions, and he always keeps the end goal in sight. Some day you may need those bodies you ran over trying to get from point A to point B.”

Rogers, BA ’78, MBA ’84, FedEx’s vice president of U.S. marketing, has had 12 different jobs in her 23 years with the company. In each, she has built on her reputation for marketing, and managing, with a win/win philosophy.

In her current role, global brand management is just one of a number of major responsibilities. The position also gives Rogers oversight of all U.S. advertising and brand management as well as the company’s world-class portfolio of sports sponsorships and marketing

alliances. Think FedExCup, the PGA tour’s new championship trophy, and Joe Gibbs Racing, the FedEx sponsorship in NASCAR.

“One of the areas of advertising that is really TiVo-proof is sports,” Rogers observes. “There’s a huge phenomenon of companies either integrating into sports platforms programs or sponsoring sporting events, because no one wants to TiVo a sporting event—they watch it

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Rogers is also thinking up new ways to manage word of mouth advertising. “Word of mouth is the most powerful means that a small business uses to make decisions,” she says. “We’re just getting into it in terms of looking for the people who are the influencers. Who is it that small business people are really listening to? Their accountant? Their attorney? I look at all the content out there on MySpace and YouTube and think about

how to get more inventive. The bar is definitely higher.”

A fan of NASCAR racing and professional bull riding, Rogers doesn’t shy away from professional risk-taking. Earlier in her career, not long after her promotion to international marketing director, she stepped up to serve for a year on a hand-selected team charged with refining FedEx’s long-term strategy.

If she hadn’t taken on that

challenge—outside the usual framework for promotions—she probably wouldn’t have had a chance to work on fedex.com. In 2000, Rogers took on the responsibilities of managing director of fedex.com, leading the effort to set the company up as a leader across industries and internationally for its innovative use of the Internet as a marketing tool and customer interface.

While developing the Web site, Rogers worked directly with company founder, chairman and CEO Fred Smith, whose take on technology and its potential has driven the company’s growth.

“Technology has allowed us to change the way we go to market with new products and services,” Rogers says.

A focus on marketing as it relates to the customer experience has defined Rogers’ professional responsibilities, but she’s been sure to diverge from her passion when opportunity has knocked. One early promotion came when she took on a mundane project overseeing rate sheets.

“It was the kind of project nobody wanted. If you made a mistake, there

Packages are being checked before they are loaded onto one of the company’s jets at Alliance Airport in Fort Worth, Texas.

NATALIE CAHOILL, MOT



would be millions of dollars in impact. And if you did it well, you wouldn’t get accolades,” she explains. Her tack was to reengineer the process in a way that saved the company money—which called attention of higher-ups to her skills and ingenuity.

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Fail to, she says, and a step up could turn into a professional dead end.

“Karen has the ability to look at everything with that fresh perspective,” says colleague Gayle Christensen, director of global brand management for FedEx. “If there’s a way to fine-tune an effort, she will see it.”

Christensen and her team, who work under Rogers’ direction, were recently putting the finishing touches on a vital Web-based photography library for global FedEx employees. When the project was close to completion, Rogers quickly offered in a meeting that tweaking how the photos were cropped could help unify the branding message, tightening the grip FedEx had on its all-important image. Even in the photographs, branding is vital, notes Christensen, and “Karen is a wonderful resource. There’s always that spark.”

Rogers’ focus may be global now, but her career grows out of strong roots in Tennessee. Her mother, successful in the securities business in Tennessee when Rogers was growing up, coached her daughter early, making sure Rogers embraced an “if it’s worth doing at all, it’s worth doing well” sensibility. Rogers took that advice to heart, even when she was sweeping walkways at Nashville’s now-defunct Opryland amusement park.

Rogers credits Owen with getting her to FedEx in the first place. “My plan was to stay here for two years and then return to Nashville because my family was

Have A Package? Just FedEx It

How a phrase has the world talking

It was William Shakespeare who was first noted for uttering “What’s in a name?” but Karen Rogers can hold her own for helping to bring new significance to the phrase—at least to the world of business.

In the last decade, FedEx is a company that’s led the way in lending branding new importance in the world of business communications and marketing.

“The highest achievement of advertising, public relations, is to get the manufactured, manipulative idea ‘off the page,’ ... and accepted as part of speech,” playwright and screenwriter David Mamet has said. “E.g., ‘I’ll FedEx it.’”

Branding forges relationships with consumers and helps retain them, says Rogers.

Analysts and observers agree.

“Brand equity is more than ‘Hey, I’ve heard of those guys.’” says David Gardner, best known for his



role in advising investors as a co-founder of Motley Fool. “It’s about trust and quality and the ‘right image.’”

Of the FedEx image makeover in 1995, when the company ceremoniously changed its name from FDX Corp. to FedEx, Gardner notes: “Not Federal Express but FedEx ... People are too busy to say Federal Express. If someone needed to get a package out ASAP, precious time could be lost on all those syllables. Just FedEx it.”

there,” she says. “Twelve jobs later and I’m still growing. That’s why I’ve stayed with FedEx.”

As Rogers discusses her career, her enthusiasm never wanes, even when recalling the challenges she first encountered in the company’s nascent, and ultimately doomed, fax mail division, an early effort by FedEx to embrace technology as a marketing tool.

That was in 1984, the heyday of the fax as cutting-edge business communication tool. Not long after she started, FedEx saw that the business model was limited and axed the entire department. The people within the department, however, all stayed.

“Everyone kept his or her job,” says Rogers. That instilled in her a great sense of loyalty to the company.

Last May, FedEx began offering next-business day service in China, providing time-definite services to 19 Chinese cities and day-definite services to more than 200 additional Chinese cities.

“Think about it. The ability to have guaranteed, next-day service in China is amazing,” Rogers says. “With the new overnight services, FedEx connects more than 90 percent of China’s GDP to the rest of the world through its global network.”

Technology and global expansion will continue to make for interesting oppor-

tunities, she says, especially at a company that's shown it's ready to embrace both. But she still has her eye on middle Tennessee and she remains committed to giving back to Owen.

Maintaining ties to Vanderbilt is important, she says, "whether it's just for me to get back to, and give back to, the school" or to reap more tangible rewards.

"She's very decisive," says Peter Veruki, Owen's director of corporate relations. "She's a true executive."

Though globalization and technology make for exciting times in marketing in Rogers' eyes, she often cautions Vanderbilt MBA candidates and executives that many businesses still have a long way to go in embracing marketing's full potential.

"Marketing is a missed opportunity at many companies," says Rogers. "If the

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When asked about her next greatest challenge, Rogers instantly identifies three that apply not only to FedEx but to many U.S. companies—trade imbalance, demographics and the environment.

"I think the biggest challenge we have is the imbalance of trade," she says. "More and more, the U.S. is becoming a consumptive society. Right now there are hundreds of thousands of containers of freight from Asia that come to the U.S. full and they aren't even shipped back because it's not worth it. They stay here empty. What do we do to create more balance?"

Rogers also worries about changing U.S. demographics. "There are far more

people retiring now than are in the pipeline. At FedEx as at most companies, people are our number one asset. Yet we know there's going to be an outgoing flood of baby boomers as that whole generation retires. If you look at the size of the workforce, it's not sufficient to replace the amount of talent that's going out the door."

FedEx, Rogers notes, has just announced that it is acquiring a fleet of environmentally friendly vehicles. "We are a company that runs on fuel. We have trucks, we have planes, we have vans, and we're trying to ensure that we have the right formula for something that will be sustainable. Right now the debate is whether it's going to be hydrogen or corn, and what are we going to do to wean ourselves off our dependence on foreign fuel. It's pretty clear that we as a

society are finally just acknowledging the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the environment. I'm proud of FedEx for taking a lead."

For now, Rogers looks forward to the onslaught of challenges at FedEx. The company's acquisition of Kinko's has helped broaden FedEx's portfolio and merge the digital world with the physical world.

"We have the ground company, we have the air company, we have the freight company, we're global, and we're connecting the world of digital space to businesses," she says. "If you compare our performance to the S & P 500, we really are a company that's well positioned for the future."

Special appreciation to GayNelle Doll for her contribution to this story.

KAREN'S KEYS TO LEADERSHIP

"Your leadership will dictate your success on Wall Street as well as on Main Street," Karen Rogers told first-year students during an orientation presentation in August. "It's not something you get out of a book—the life experiences you have and the way you study those life experiences make all the difference."

Rogers shared eight keys to effective leadership—a blend of her own philosophy and the company's "purple promise" to make every FedEx experience outstanding:

Know yourself and let others know you.

Know your weaknesses as well as your strengths. As a marketing person and as a leader, the thing I'm worst at is administration. I realized a long time ago I don't like dealing with administrative details, but I know these are critical business processes, so I hire people good at it and often make myself "just do it."

I'm vice president of 100 people but I still welcome feedback. I'm a work in progress. The best knowledge I get is from feedback I get from my members.

Be transparent, be open, share. When you learn about yourself, it's okay to share that information with others because that way they understand you.

Care about your people.

As human beings, we have an innate sense of whether people are fending for themselves or really caring about you. People know if you want to get ahead at their expense. The leaders who want to make you look good are the leaders you want to follow, because you know they care about you.

As a leader, think about your role as coach. I acknowledge everyone's successes, and I like to celebrate. Being enthusiastic is just in my DNA and peo-

ple like that. It's contagious.

One of the first things I do when I'm on a new team is to figure out a quick win. That starts everyone talking about it and it becomes contagious: others want to be a part of it and be successful as well.

Create a vision and provide clear direction.

Stay out of the weeds. As a leader, the first thing your folks will push back on is if you get mired in the details and say, "I'm a quant jock, I can do these numbers." You've communicated to the individual that you don't respect that person.

Remember the four D's: delegate, discard, defer, and be decisive—don't over-analyze. The higher up you go in the organization, the more you need to prioritize. Your time should be precious to you. I don't even open most of my e-mail. I have people who handle it and I don't worry about it.

Your character is your most valued asset.

Character is the one thing that you carry with you from one job to the next—it is your personal brand. If you tell someone you're going to do something, do it. If you tell them you're going to be somewhere at a certain point in time, be there. If you don't, you're not showing respect for that individual.

Be courageous. If you're not taking any risks, you're not doing your job.

If it doesn't feel right, don't do it.

Choose the right people.

This is the most important decision you will make as a leader.

A leader's job is not to be the smartest. Hire up, and hire people who have better technical acumen than you do. They will make the team more effec-

tive. It's not all about you. Your organization's power is only as good as the least common denominator. The more bright people on your team, the more bright people you'll attract.

Emotional intelligence is the X-factor. Last year when I was among a group of marketers asked to come to Owen and talk about what we look for in MBAs, it was the soft skills we all identified as important; we take it for granted that you have the technical ability.

Be inclusive and value everyone on the team. Diversity isn't just how you look, but you how think. With different skills you'll come up with a much more eloquent solution than if you hire people who all think just like you do. If everyone on the team looks and talks and thinks like me, I might as well be sitting in front of the mirror talking to myself.

You must personally add value.

As a leader, much of your job is navigating the organizational complexities you'll find in any organization. Whether there are five people or 5,000, there are going to be politics. You have to be able to read tea leaves and understand who's got the power and what people really want and how you can have impact. Learn about politics by being a good student of human behavior.

You're not going to have impact by yourself. You can have a great mission, a great cause, and be absolutely right, but you're still going to need others to help you, or trust me, they're going to derail you.

As a leader, people are looking for you to anticipate obstacles and remove barriers. You have to be able to sell your ideas, to talk about ideas in a way that is compelling and engaging. You have to be able to sell your people, too.

Be a positive force in the organization

and always believe that it can be done. People watch what you do. If you're not setting the right example in how you're making a difference, then why should they care?

Give back.

Think through how you can make an impact locally and in the community. You really can change lives. If you really want to learn and test your leadership ability, there are plenty of agencies that need your help, starting when you're an MBA student.

Find the right fit and make two-step moves.

I've been at FedEx for 23 years because it's a company that aligns with my personal values. You spend more time at your job than anywhere else. If you don't feel good when you go home every night, ultimately it's going to undermine your effectiveness.

Be flexible and embrace change. I've had 12 jobs in my 23 years at FedEx, and I love it. If I've been in a job too long, then I've got my personal stamp on it. Am I apt to think something is wrong with it? No. I'm apt to think it's pretty darned good because I invented it or endorsed it.

With your career, as in chess, planning ahead several steps is important. A man who worked on my marketing team was anxious to get promoted from manager to director, and he left FedEx and went to work for a utility company. If you're a marketing person, don't go to work for a monopoly. They don't need you. Six months later he was laid off. He had made a one-step move.

If you would like to hear Karen in her own words, please visit <http://lowen.vanderbilt.edu/podcasts> to hear her podcast on leadership.